Children

How many of you have a pet? Has anyone ever had a pet that died? How did that make you feel? You were very sad, weren’t you? In fact, you probably cried.

Have you had someone you love very much die? That was a very sad time, too, wasn’t it?

Today’s Bible lesson is from Paul, explaining to the people in the church that even though they are sad when someone dies, they should be encouraged to know that we will see them again. Jesus is making a wonderful place called heaven for us to live after we die. Everyone who loves Jesus can go there. That is where this word (show your “BUT” card) comes in. We are sad . . . BUT . . . we will meet again in heaven.

(If you have index cards for the children, pass them out now and say): when you look at this card, remember God has a wonderful plan for heaven for each of us. We may be sad now, BUT God has a plan.

Adult

I want to begin today by asking you to imagine that you get a call from a lawyer telling you that you are the main beneficiary of your Great Uncle Frank’s will. Now, everyone had said that Frank was more than a bit eccentric and rather avoided him, but you always went out of your way to visit him, joke with him, and so forth. Well, it turns out that Great Uncle Frank was rich. He left you ta great deal of money, but in his typical fashion, he had certain rules. Everyday for a year, you would receive $86,400. The money would be administered by the lawyers. You had to spend the $86,400 every day. You couldn’t withdraw it to save it. And you had to show receipts for how you spent the money. At the end of each day, whatever you did not spend would be removed from your account. The next day you would start with a fresh $86,400.

I am sure that you and I would find some really creative things to do with the money.

Now, let's return to reality. Every day we are given 86,400 seconds to use wisely. Every night, God writes off as lost whatever portion of this time we have not used well or have wasted. In the bank of time, there are no balances and no overdrafts. Each day a new account is opened for us. Each night, what remains is written off, lost, gone forever.

Everyday's 86,400 seconds have to be invested in commodities that will hold their value from day to day, quarter to quarter, year to year and beyond. These commodities are lasting values like justice, compassion, forgiveness, and love.

There were five wise virgins and five foolish ones. The five foolish virgins squandered their time. The five wise virgins made the best use of every moment. The wise virgins entered into the banquet of the Master's love. The foolish virgins were too busy wasting time to be ready for their Master's return. They were locked out of the celebration.

How much time do you and I have left? We really don't know. Recently, we have had young members come down with sudden illnesses and die just a few months after the diagnosis. Another died due to an accident. In our American denial of death, we all like to think that sudden death happens to other people and that this could not happen to any of us. But it does.

Did you ever read the comic the Wizard of Id? That's the one with the little short king. In one strip, King Twerp calls the royal monk in to ask him a theological question. He asks the monk, "How do you feel about capital punishment?"

"There's not much we can do about it," the monk says to the King.  
The King is quite perplexed by this answer, "What do you mean that there is not much we can do about the death penalty?"

"Well, the fact is," says the monk, "that we are all born with it."

The proper Christian attitude is not to deny death, but to prepare for it. This is the wisdom behind the five bridesmaids who were prepared to enter the wedding reception. They didn't know when the bridegroom was coming, but they were ready.

So how do we prepare? Well, survivalists prepare secret places where they hope to live for months or years after what they figure will be a devastating war. They gathering supplies. Evidently, they want a lot of toilet paper. Chances are good that the Survivalists in Florida have stocked up on Ensure. (Sorry, I couldn't pass that up.) These methods are all wrong. We do not prepare for the end by saving a lot of stuff, or by doing a lot of things. We prepare for the end by nurturing the proper disposition, the Christian attitude. Some of the most important words in scripture are two verses from Paul's Letter to the Romans:

Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect. Romans 12:1-2.

"Be transformed by renewal of mind." Paul tells us to take an attitude of life that is completely different from the attitude of the world. Throughout the Gospels, particularly in Matthew where today's gospel is taken, Jesus emphasizes the need for inner transformation. His complaint against the Pharisees was that they were hypocrites. They behaved one way, but were another way. He called them whiten sepulchers. On the outside, they looked nice and clean. On the inside they were rotten. The tax collectors and prostitutes who turned to Jesus transformed their lives. Their devotion to the Lord was a reflection of the Christian disposition they had taken on.

So, how do we form and nourish the Christian attitude of life? On the negative, we cannot give ourselves over to that which destroys the presence of the Lord. We live in a materialistic society. To the vast majority of society success is counted in the amount of possessions a person accumulates. Pleasure, even fleeting pleasure, is the goal of life. The glorification of sex is just one of the many ways that this is expressed. We, you and I, have to fight against the forces outside of us and, particularly, within us that are drawing us into materialism and away from the Christian disposition of life.

On the positive, we can form and nourish the Christian disposition by continually communicating with the Lord. We need to pray daily. We need to find a time, even if it is brief, but still a time when we can be with the Lord and freed of the distractions of life. If we have a family, then we have the additional responsibility to pray as a family every day. Bedtime prayers when the children are little is a great time for this. As they get older, Mom and Dad should continue praying with their children every evening and then, as time goes on, for their children every evening.

The main focus of our prayer life should be on the Lord’s Day, Sunday. On Sunday we celebrate the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord and, if we are able to come to Mass, receive the Eucharist. The presence of Christ within us in this sacrament gives us the strength to be who we claim to be, Christians.

Have you ever waited for someone who was late? Sure you have. A Friday night date, or a ride to work, or dinner guests? It’s the most exasperating thing we ever do – to wait. When they’re just a few minutes late, we’re relieved because we really weren’t ready for them anyway! When they are half an hour late, we get angry. After an hour, we become worried. But sooner or later in our waiting, we think the dreaded thought. “I’ll bet they aren’t coming at all. No phone call. No email. They’re simply not going to show.”

The ascension of Jesus took place in 29 AD, Matthew’s gospel was written about 70 AD. By the time Matthew had recorded this parable, the Christian Church had already waited for more than forty years. Do you suppose that waiting got pretty old after forty years? Do you suppose some Christians lost interest or patience, or even lost faith that Jesus would ever come back for them? I mean, how much oil do you need in your lamp to keep it burning for forty years?

But it has now been two millennia since the ascension of Jesus, and the idea that the Christian church is waiting in breathless anticipation for him to return has grown pretty dim. We say we are waiting…watching…anticipating, but in the meantime, other things have captured our attention. We’re raising our children. We’re planning for our retirements. We’re arranging 30-year mortgages on our homes. And all of this is done without much thought to the coming of Christ. I mean, he didn’t come last century. He hasn’t come so far this century. Who knows? He might not be coming at all.

But you see, he is coming; scripture promises it. We don’t know when; Jesus indicated that he didn’t even know when. Not even those angels in heaven know when. But I can tell you that today, and the gospel readings in Advent will reinforce the promise, that Jesus is indeed coming again.

So in the meantime, what do we do? We sleep. Like the maidens in our parable, we sleep during this wait that seems endless. And that’s okay. Notice that the maidens in the story were not criticized for their slumber. And notice too, that both maidens wise and maidens foolish were able to sleep, though I think for different reasons. The foolish maidens slept out of boredom. They had long since lost interest in ever seeing the bridegroom, and their lack of oil was an indication of their apathy. They never really expected to see the bridegroom. The wise maidens, however, were able to sleep because they were at peace. Their oil lamps were full. They had done all they could in preparation. They were ready, with nothing left to do but wait.

This parable of the maidens, if it does anything, it encourages us to keep our oil lamps filled as we wait. The oil is not our good deeds. It is not doing things that will make Jesus love us more.

Today's first reading speaks about wisdom. Wisdom is a way of life. The wise are always ready for the Lord because they are always united to him. The gospel lesson is simple for this Sunday. Be like the wise virgins. Be ready to celebrate the banquet of the Lord’s love.

II

It has been several decades since Pastor John Lloyd Ogilvie wrote his book about the parables of Jesus titled, The Autobiography of God. As Ogilvie pointed out, this “autobiography” – this self-writing – is exactly what the parables of Jesus are.[1] They are the description of the kingdom of God by God’s own self.” Jesus did not write them down as an author would; he told them to small groups, to angry crowds, to the masses, to individuals, and most often, to his disciples. He painted word-pictures about what life would be like on the other side. And all of these centuries later, Christians young and old have continued to gain glimpses of heaven by reading and telling the stories Jesus told.

We learn from God’s autobiography that the kingdom of heaven is not at all like the kingdom of the world. There are differences; significant differences. Differences that affect how we look at life in God’s kingdom on earth. For instance, in God’s kingdom, fathers forgive sons, even though the sons may thoughtlessly squander half of the family fortune. In the kingdom of heaven, workers who work one hour are paid the same as the workers who worked a lifetime. In the kingdom, going out of one’s way for one’s neighbor is honored and encouraged, and self-serving security is despised. In the kingdom of God, a shepherd will leave 99 sheep in the pasture in order to seek the one who had wandered away. These are the parables. This is God’s autobiography.

And yet, we read these stories and scratch our heads at their crazy implications – and they are crazy, you know! – we wonder about their practicality. Prodigal sons and good Samaritans are not of much value in the world’s twenty-first-century economy. Looking for one lost lamb is not a cost-effective practice. Labor unions will not allow a full day’s pay for a half-day of work unless everybody gets it. In short, the parables that describe the kingdom are very different from the world in which you and I live. But you already knew that.

Yet, the parable that stands before us today is unique. This is one that we could have written, for there is much similarity between the parable and our contemporary world. In Jesus’ parable, people who are not prepared are called “foolish.” We would concur. “Get your own oil, I’m not sharing!” Those are our words precisely. “You were too late; you can’t come in.” Spoken like one of us. This is a parable with our own world’s values intact, and yet Jesus says that this, too, is how it will be in the kingdom of heaven. This is a parable of watching and waiting and being ready. If it sounds too harsh to come from Jesus’ lips, then perhaps we have misunderstood the parable. There’s got to be a word of grace here, right? There simply has to be, for this is the autobiography of God, for heaven’s sake!

On the front wall in many churches, there is a mural depicting the ascension of Jesus. All of the disciples are present there, along with Mary, and Mary Magdalene, and two brightly-dressed angels. The words written at the bottom of the mural are attributed to those angels:

*“Galileans, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This same Jesus whom you saw go up into heaven will come again in the same way.”*

So the waiting had officially begun. Anyone who knew of Jesus recounted the times he had promised that he would return, and the angels of Ascension Day confirmed it. But you see, most thought Jesus’ return was imminent. It would only be a matter of a few days…a couple of weeks at most. And so these faithful Christian people waited… and waited...and waited for the return of the Savior.

Have you ever waited for someone who was late? Sure you have. A Friday night date, or a ride to work, or dinner guests? It’s the most exasperating thing we ever do – to wait. When they’re just a few minutes late, we’re relieved because we really weren’t ready for them anyway! When they are half an hour late, we get angry. After an hour, we become worried. But sooner or later in our waiting, we think the dreaded thought. “I’ll bet they aren’t coming at all. No phone call. No email. They’re simply not going to show.”

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This parable of the maidens, if it does anything, it encourages us to keep our oil lamps filled as we wait. The oil is not our good deeds. It is not doing things that will make Jesus love us more. The oil is not jumping through hoops until Jesus comes, so that when he does come, he will be impressed with our effort. We have grace for that! The oil of our lamps is the oil of faith. It is the oil of prayer. It is the oil of loving Jesus and serving our neighbor. Our oil is replenished through the study of God’s word, and singing hymns of praise, and recalling the depth of his love. Being ready is not being perfect. Being ready might not even mean being awake. Being ready is trusting that God’s promises are true, and God’s grace is sufficient.

Many years ago, I saw a young man at the state fair wearing a T-shirt with the likeness of Jesus on the front, and these words printed there:

*Jesus is coming soon…*

And as he walked by, I noticed that the back of the shirt completed the message:

*And is he ticked off!*

People, he is coming soon, and he comes in judgment, but he is not ticked off. He comes in love, and compassion; filled with grace. He comes looking for the flames that flicker in the lives of those who wait.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. © 1981, The Autobiography of God, John Lloyd Ogilvie, Baker Publishing